Notes: This essay was written as an assignment in my Visual Anthropology class. In class, we discussed many societal issues and how the media is only encouraging further discrimination and stereotypes. For my final paper, I took a popular Disney movie and dissected several unfortunate discriminations, stereotypes, and misinterpretations that we have been exposing to millions of children.

Bugs are People, Too

A Critical Analysis of “A Bug’s Life”

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The bug characters in *A Bug’s Life* precisely represent societal stereotypes and problems amongst the human population. Disney created bug actions to mirror human actions and with this they produced a movie filled to the brim with racism and misgendering—without human characters. These faults that Disney created were probably easy to overlook in production, for they were only dealing with bugs. However, with skilled vision (Grasseni 2011) viewers take into account anything. Viewers simply see a little mosquito dancing to “La Cucaracha”, but in reality that mosquito represents a Mexican. The viewer’s skilled vision (Grasseni 2011) takes over in this movie without the slightest notice, for Disney is just messing around with meaningless bugs. As Solomon (1990) might say, we are “hoodwinked” by Disney and *A Bug’s Life*, and the viewer must ponder the hidden messages and semiotics behind specific characters of *A Bug’s Life*.

*A Bug’s Life* tells a story of a colony of ants collecting food every season for a gang of grasshoppers. Flik, an awkward and foolish yet brave little ant, manages to knock the supply of food over, thus the grasshoppers threaten the colony. Flik is essentially exiled from the colony, so he goes to find ‘warrior’ bugs. Instead, he finds misfit circus bugs that follow Flik to assist the colony and construct a plan to ward off the grasshoppers. After the movie goes back and forth in its plot of defeating the grasshoppers, or not defeating the grasshoppers, eventually after everything the colony has gone through, the ant princess supports Flik in standing up to the grasshoppers and the entire colony follows suit. This is the grasshopper’s worst fear, as they usually power play and demean the ants, when in reality the ants outnumber the grasshoppers 100 to 1.

It sounds harmless. The main message is that a large group can overthrow oppressive power, because typically there are only a few oppressors compared to the many being oppressed.
It’s a great message that the group should stand up for themselves. However, Disney manages to misguidedly and unfortunately, hit home for the LGBTQ+ community, more specifically the transgender community, making misgendering seem funny. They misinterpret a ladybug’s gender—even though the bug looks like a lady, he is a male. Disney creates a very negative image of Mexicans through mosquitoes, as well as foreigners in general.

“Who you callin’ lady?” or “So! Bein' a ladybug automatically makes me a girl. Is that it, fly boy? Eh?”, are typical responses from Francis the lady bug. Upon hearing Francis’ masculine voice, numerous bugs reply “Yikes! She's a guy!”

Francis, the male ladybug, does not look like a male character. Francis’ face is complete with long eyelashes, soft pink cheeks, and accentuation of her eyes. Disney didn’t make it seem as if he was applying makeup every morning, but they created Francis’ character with animated female traits. These female traits were apparent in the appearances of other female characters in the movie, like the butterfly and princess Atta. The only defining way a viewer could articulate that Francis was male is his deep, raspy voice.

Along with that raspy voice (the famous Denis Leary), Francis is portrayed as tough and mighty. Flies approach Francis flirting and jeering “Hey there, girly bug,” already knowing that Francis was a male. The frustrated ladybug reacts with absolutely no movement, and simply states “shoo fly, don’t bother me.” This displays the displeasure Francis has towards misgendering and being ridiculed, mocked and a parody act. However, Disney simply included this scene in the movie so that Francis, spunky and tough, would spit out “shoo fly don’t bother me” to an actual fly. Disney just created a scene where misgendering was supposed to be funny. Just as Giroux (1999) and Lippi-Green (1998) concluded, Disney is teaching children how to discriminate.
The struggle that Francis is constantly put through represents and mirrors people’s struggles in our society. Many people in the transgender community take this hard-hitting toll daily. Disney isn’t necessarily encouraging misgendering, however they made it a running joke throughout the movie. If one were to imitate the actions in this movie, it would be perfectly acceptable to laugh at misgendering. *A Bug’s Life* justifies any humor in misgendering. The viewers’ (typically young children) skilled vision teaches them life skills and cultural norms—humorous misgendering and discrimination should not be included.

Later in the film, Francis saves Dot, the Princesses daughter, and all of Dot’s friends are eternally grateful. They deem him the “den mother” of their clan of friends. They even create ladybug-like capes to wear in honor of him. At first, Francis is very resentful of the dubbed title, “den mother” as he undoubtedly unsure about the mother title for himself as a male. Eventually, Francis accepts the title and lovingly protects his coven of Dot’s friends.

One may speculate that this was a step forward for Francis, and that in society we must push all titles and labels aside, just as Francis has done with his misgendered label of mother. Others may speculate that Francis has ultimately given in to the misgendering and lost his sense of identity. Francis’ constant teasing of his gender and then need to correct them can easily emulate a transgender individual searching over and over for their sense of self and identity. Then one day maybe it becomes too hard for this person amongst their self-discovery, and they give in to the societal norms, thus comprising their well being. When it became too hard for Francis, he gave in to the title of “den mother,” thus symbolizing surrendering to societal stereotypes. There are different lengths people are willing to fight for their sense of identity, but everyone has a tipping point where society swallows them. Francis may have reached his tipping point with Dot’s friends, surrendering his identity and living with the misgendering. Hopefully,
the first speculation is correct and that Francis has come to terms with himself that whatever he may be called is irrelevant to whom he actually is as a bug/person. Either way, Disney jokes about the male being called an opposite gender term: “mother,” and it’s not so funny.

However, Disney deserves a little creative animation credit here. Somehow they made it so bugs were perceived as human races. It’s fairly impressive considering they are animated bugs, but not so impressive when they create negative images of certain races.

While the grasshoppers wait for the ants to pick all their food, they hideout in the desert. Not just in the desert nevertheless, but in a sombrero under a cactus. The hideout is then on full display showing that the place they are in is a tequila bottle and has signs saying “peligro! danger!” and “muy caliente” among the trashed products. La Cucaracha is playing and grasshoppers are dancing to it. The grasshoppers are ordering drinks from the mosquito bartenders in broken Spanish, and the leader of the grasshoppers is playing darts with the mosquitoes.

The grasshoppers overtook these mosquitoes home and clearly, according to the broken Spanish, song playing and writings, they are Mexican.

Disney does not paint a pretty picture for Mexicans. The mosquitoes are extremely disrespected, for they are used as darts for a game and behind a bar. Not once does a grasshopper have an interaction with them more than asking for a drink. Portrayed as working for the grasshoppers, the mosquitoes were obviously in a lower class than the grasshoppers.

Not only does Disney make the mosquitoes and Mexicans alike extremely disrespected, but the picture they have created with the scene of the sombrero is not one of elegance, but of grime and dirt. Stereotypically, Mexicans are associated with cartels or illegal activity crossing the border in the desert. The sombrero is placed in the middle of nowhere in the desert. One of
the grasshoppers is being massaged on a bullet casing. This representation of illegal activities and cartels in the desert is not the association that needs to be fortified of the Mexican culture. In reality, mosquito does not equal Mexican, however, in this movie the representation (Hall) of mosquitoes does equal Mexican. Unfortunately, the concept builds a system of representation (Hall) of reality that presupposes a negative image of Mexicans.

Along with the encouraged racism of Mexicans, the pillbugs in *A Bug’s Life* are also targeted racially. While we may not know the exact race of the pill bugs the viewer is presented with these two buffoons who run around with no understanding of social cues. They exclaim things out of context and are portrayed as dumb little bugs that can’t even speak—they only say one word the whole movie. The rest of their communication is mumblings. Viewers know these bugs are foreigners because of their accents. It seems to be a Slovak accent although one can’t exactly be sure. Their accent sets them apart and makes them foreigners. Regardless of the characters being bugs, they are still a negative representation (Hall 2002) of foreigners in society. *A Bug’s Life* illustrates the pill bugs as dumb foreigners, once again, encouraging more aversion and racism towards foreigners. The racism towards the Mexican mosquitoes and the foreigner pillbugs in *A Bug’s Life* isn’t helping our society’s racism problem. It’s creating sub-conscious racism.

Along with foreigner disrespect, the Asian mysticism stereotype is also reinforced. The praying mantis is introduced while he is in a trance, and he does all of his circus acts with a Chinese take out box. He emphasizes that his magic comes from “the mysterious uncharted areas of Asia.” Society stereotypes Asians with mystery and wisdom. The praying mantis also speaks very slowly and gives advice accentuating the Confucius-era wise man similarities. It’s simple
for the viewer to pick up how the movie represented the Asian population. *A Bug’s Life* stereotyped them to the Asian mysticism.

Disney has cultivated these bugs to represent people in society. Sneakily, they create notions imbedding misgendering, racism and discrimination into our society little by little. *A Bug’s Life* is just a snippet into the damage Disney has done to our society through representation as well as skilled vision (Grasseni 2011). The viewers of this movie have used their skilled vision to match each and every bug to its societal representation of people. Disney then fills these skilled visions with discrimination. *A Bug’s Life* is a movie with laughs and smiles, but unfortunately some of those smiles come at the expense of stereotyping society.
References


